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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 003186

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/10/2014
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KS](#) [PINR](#)
SUBJECT: TIMELINE AND PROSPECTS FOR ROK'S IRAQ TROOP
EXTENSION

Classified By: POL M/C Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4 (b,d).

¶1. (C) The ROKG officially kicked off proceedings to decide on extending the deployment of South Korean troops to Irbil, Iraq. On October 23, President Roh made a televised announcement asking for understanding and cooperation to extend the deployment for another year. The extension bill faces a fierce debate in the National Assembly (NA); the ruling United New Democratic Party (UNDP), led by their presidential candidate Chung Dong-young, has officially decided to oppose the bill. The bare majority of the UNDP and the left-wing Democratic Labor Party (DLP) in the NA means that a mere handful of votes from pro-Roh lawmakers and the more moderate members of the UNDP will be critical in determining the fate of the bill. END SUMMARY.

PROCEDURES AND TIMEFRAME

¶2. (SBU) Once submitted to the NA, the troop extension bill will have to first pass the Defense Committee and then the Plenary. According to our NA contacts, the schedule for now is as follows:

-- Early November: ROKG submission of the bill.

-- Week of November 12: NA Defense Committee discussion and vote -- the date will be determined when the bill arrives at the NA.

-- November 22-23: Final vote at the Plenary. This is the last two days of this year's regular session, drafted so as to wind down before the launch of the official presidential election campaign. Nevertheless, an extension of the NA session is possible, depending on how the proceedings go.

CHUNG'S 'MERCENARIES' COMMENT DRAWS FIRE

¶3. (SBU) Grand National Party (GNP) presidential candidate Lee Myung-bak said he supported extending the troop deployment because the Iraqi government wanted South Korean involvement and because South Korea stood to gain economically from this relationship. UNDP candidate Chung criticized Lee, saying, "Lee must answer whether he means it is all right for Korean troops to be a source for mercenaries worldwide."

¶4. (SBU) Chung's comment sparked controversy among the other parties, as well as concern within the UNDP. The GNP immediately rebutted, with its spokesperson Na Kyung-won suggesting that Chung demand an apology from President Roh who was most accountable for the troop extension. The Democratic Party (DP) also said Chung's comments were motivated "to garner the liberal votes, at the expense of insulting the military." UNDP spokesman Choi Jae-cheon tried to defend Chung by saying the comment was taken out of context, many in and around the UNDP are concerned about the impact on Chung's support ratings.

COMMENT

¶5. (C) At this point, the prospects are good for Defense Committee passage -- 10 out of 18 members are either GNP (8) or DP (2), both of which support the bill. Still, the final vote at the plenary meeting remains extremely unpredictable. The UNDP (141) and Democratic Labor Party (9) combined would constitute a majority of the 299 seats. Some UNDP members will break ranks to remain loyal to Roh, either voting in favor of the extension or abstaining. Pro-Roh confidants -- including Rhyu Si-min, Lee Kwang-jae and Lee Hwa-young - as well as moderates and Defense Committee Members -- including former National Defense Minister Cho Sung-tae, pro-US lawmaker Yoo Jay Kun, Kim Myung-ja, and Ahn Young-keun -- might vote with Roh instead of Chung Dong-young or simply abstain. This handful of lawmakers could make the difference in a vote where as few as 10 votes could be critical in determining the fate of the bill. This is why the most likely outcome is for the bid to win passage, but barely.

¶6. (C) This is not an issue of deeply held conviction and belief for the vast majority of South Korean voters. No Korean soldier has been killed in Iraq. The proposal also involves a deep cut in the number of troops. For these reasons, a plurality of the public still supports the deployment extension bill. In an October 23-24 survey jointly conducted by CBS, a radio broadcasting station, and Real Meter, a polling company, 46.1 percent supported the extension with 36.5 percent opposed.

¶7. (C) Still, for the progressive presidential candidates, the Iraq deployment is a key issue, because their main constituents - the far left and the NGOs - care deeply. The UNDP presidential candidate's approval rating is right around 20 percent, and he cannot afford to lose 3-4 percent. To do so would put him perilously close to the poll numbers of independent progressive candidate Moon Kuk-hyun, which would inevitable trigger calls for Chung to drop out of the race in favor of Moon. END COMMENT.

VERSHBOW